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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the experiences of an activist group in Karachi (Pakistan) in raising awareness of sexual crimes against women, pursuant to a rape of a professional woman which occurred during an armed robbery. It describes how, since rape was regarded as rare or nonexistent in a conservative, Islamic society, the efforts of the Women's Action Forum (WAF) to notify top government officials about their concern that women were being raped during armed robberies were largely in vain. WAF's formation of a subcommittee called War Against Rape (WAR), which broke new ground as a consciousness-raising group tackling a difficult and taboo subject, is reviewed. The 12-point statement of WAR's objectives is included, and the accomplishments of WAR in breaking the silence over rape and disseminating information are discussed, along with the problems it has faced in reaching or empowering the victims. Five brief case histories are included to illustrate these problems. The paper concludes that rape is a manifestation of the exploitation and oppression which pervades Pakistani society at large and that WAR's accomplishments thus far are only a beginning. (TE)

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PERSPECTIVES IN HUMAN BEHAVIOUR IN THE CHANGING GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT

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WAR AGAINST RAPE [WAR]: The Experience of an Activist Group in Karachi in Raising Awareness of Sexual Crimes Against Women

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WAR AGAINST RAPE [WAR]:
The Experience of an Activist Group in Karachi
in Raising Awareness of Sexual Crimes Against Women

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Although Pakistan emerged on the world map in 1947, the area comprising Pakistan, the Indus valley, is the third oldest continuously inhabited region in the world. As such, its society and culture reflect a complex mosaic of values, behavioural norms and patterns of human interaction. The vast majority of the population is Muslim, but local and historical conditions give rise to a complex mixture of tribal, feudal and post-colonial social formations.

Presently, the population is about 110 million, 70 per cent of which is rural. While per capita income is low, economic growth has been among the fastest in the world. Improvement in social indicators of well-being, however, has lagged behind greatly. The rate of literacy is around 26 per cent, on average, but is only 16 per cent for women (some 7 per cent in rural areas and some 33 per cent in urban areas). The major port and city is Karachi, with an ethnically diverse population of over 8 million.

In 1989, in the course of an armed robbery, an urban, educated, professional woman was raped in Karachi. Breaking the strong social taboos which surround all matters relating to sex, she informed a member of the Women's Action Forum [WAF], the only women's activist group functioning in Pakistan. Even WAF members were deeply shocked. Upon reflection, it soon became apparent to them that this may not have been an isolated incident Members recounted cases of armed robberies in their personal knowledge in which young females present in the households robbed had suddenly gone abroad, or had sought divorce, or even committed suicide.

Until then, conventional wisdom had it that barring incidents of rape of peasant women in rural areas, associated with remnants of feudalism, rape did not take place in a conservative, Islamic society. Cities, in particular, which were both cosmopolitan and had more or less succeeded in integrating women in the workplace (both as professionals and as entrepreneurs) were thought to be free of rape, a crime associated with western societies.

Thus, even though armed robberies had become an everyday occurrence, the popular myth until then had been that the dacoits (typically, of rural origins) exhibited an old world courtesy toward women, in sharp contrast to the activity in which they were engaged. Numerous anecdotes were related about how the dacoits treated women with enormous respect, to the point where they even spared expensive articles of jewelry because they were on the person of a woman, and took only that which was stored in the house.

The Karachi incident therefore was an eye-opener, not only because it happened but because women whose business it was to raise consciousness about such issues found themselves to have been silently subscribing to the dominant social myths surrounding rape. The first response of WAF was to send a telegram to the Prime Minister [Benazir Bhutto] and to top government officials and heads of political parties, expressing alarm that women were being raped during armed robberies. The text of the telegram was also released to one of the major Karachi newspapers [Dawn].

The response was poor. In part, this reflected the strong social taboos against all discussion of sex, and the norms of modesty and shame which surround a woman in Pakistani society. In part, it also reflected the highly charged political atmosphere of the times, in which WAR's claims were suspected to be politically motivated.

Following the telegram, WAF held many open meetings in which members and non-members were invited to discuss rape as a social problem. Out of these meetings, a smaller group was formed in April 1989 as a sub-committee of WAF. This group called itself War Against Rape [WAR]. In April 1990, WAR became an independent organization, no longer a sub-committee of WAF.

The formation of WAR was significant in two ways: first, that it was a consciousness raising group, a novel activity, and second, that it tackled a difficult and taboo subject.

Although individual women have distinguished themselves in important areas of action, especially during the struggle for independence, historically, group action by women has been rare. After independence (in 1947), women's groups were formed, initially to assist with relief work associated with one of the largest refugee movements recorded in history. These groups, however, were concerned almost exclusively with social welfare. Later, women's organizations arose which were concerned with development activities at the grass-roots level, professional issues, and research and documentation.

The first activist women's organization [Women's Action Forum, WAF] was formed in 1981, in response to a growing concern that women were being discriminated against in the implementation of the government's policy of Islamization of laws. WAF saw itself as a lobby-cum-pressure group, which aimed at raising consciousness, and promoting and protecting the rights of women in Pakistan.

At present, WAR consists of about 16 members, three of whom are men. One member is a psychologist, one a psychiatrist, while other members come from different professions. Meetings are held once a week to discuss operational issues of a day to day nature. Once a month, open meetings are held, to which all interested individuals are invited. Typically, fifty or so people show up for these open meetings. In addition, some 150 people are registered with WAR as sympathizers. In the open meetings invited speakers address issues relating to rape. This is followed by a general discussion.

WAR does not have its own office. It operates from the premises of Shirkatgah, a professional women's organization formed in 1975 to undertake research and documentation in support of problems faced by professional women.

Unlike similar centres in Western countries, WAR has not established any hotline, partly because WAR does not yet have its own premises, but mainly because telephone connections are scarce, lines are not secure, and the social taboos against matters relating to sex are so great that even the least inhibited women would not be likely to discuss this over the telephone. Above all, the social set up is such that the victim is rarely the one to establish contact. It is much more typical for a family member or a friend to seek assistance. In some ways, the pattern of WAR's work is likely to be one in which the victim is contacted in her home, following initial contact by a go-between.

One of the earliest actions of WAR was to set out a twelve-point statement of its objectives:

1. To break the silence over rape by documenting cases of rape and other sexual abuse of women and children.

2. To establish contact with victims and/or their families and friends.

3. To provide legal, medical and psychological support to the victims, their families and friends.

4. To build awareness about rape and sexual abuse by: (a) disseminating information on psychosocial factors that perpetuate silence over this issue; (b) providing information on the impact of rape and sexual abuse on the mental, physical and social well-being of the victim and her dear ones; (c) holding meetings in different localities; (d) making presentations in schools, colleges and to the non-government organizations (NGOs).

5. Encourage victims and their families and friends to seek legal, medical and psychological support.

6. To mobilize professional support for victims and their families.

7. To provide a forum for all those concerned with the issue of rape to become effective members/supporters of WAR.

8. Establish and maintain contact with police officials and sensitize the police.

9. Encourage women to take lessons in self-defense.

10. Assess the legal status of victims of rape and sexual abuse and identify weaknesses and propose changes.

11. Lobby with NGOs and the public: (a) to put social pressure on law enforcing agencies to ensure security of all citizens, especially women and children; (b) to form citizens groups in the precinct of every police station [thana]; (c) to liaise with Station Headquarters Officers [SHOs] of the thana.

12. Raise funds to facilitate the workings of WAR.

An important development in WAR's efforts to mobilize government attention came through an article entitled "When A Woman is Kidnapped" written by a WAR member, which appeared in the leading English language Karachi daily. The short article recounted seven recent cases of abduction and rape in which the point was made that crimes of sexual violence against women were on the rise. These crimes were shrouded in silence, which itself was instrumental in perpetuating such crimes.

It also brought to light the plight of the common citizens of Karachi and the total helplessness of the law and order agencies in dealing with the problem. The article drew the attention of the government. WAR members were contacted by the Governor of the province, the police force and army intelligence. While nothing concrete came out of these meetings, it was a source of quick introduction of WAR to the highest levels of government and law and order agencies.

What has WAR accomplished so far? Surprisingly, WAR has made greater progress in breaking the silence over rape and in disseminating information and creating greater awareness. This is largely due to the sympathetic attention WAR has received from some opinion leaders and the press.

Newspaper articles have focussed mainly on the psychological aspects of the rape trauma syndrome, the plight of the victim, and the common myths and misconceptions which surround this subject, and lead to victim-blaming. In addition, press statements have been given on specific cases reported in the press where rape is either reported or suspected. Handbills have been distributed, in three local languages, in leading newspapers. Posters, sensitizing the public to the need to speak up about rape, have been published and distributed. Recently, a Newsletter has been issued with the intent of periodic publication.

At the same time, many social groups have invited WAR members to speak to them about their work. In fact, demand for talks has exceeded WAR's ability to provide speakers.

In addition to articles in newspapers and talks to civic groups, WAR has established contact with the police, both to educate the police about rape and to streamline procedures for reporting of crime, so as to encourage reporting of rape. In the wake of deteriorating law and order conditions, a citizens-police liaison committee, consisting of prominent citizens, had been established. WAR established contact with this committee, so that the committee could assist WAR in facilitating reporting of cases to the police, where the police showed a reluctance to record such crimes.

The most important problem which WAR faces is its inability to penetrate the silence which seems to shroud the invisible victim. Paradoxically, thus, although WAR was formed to break the silence about rape and make it a public issue, and help the victims, reaching the victims has been extremely difficult. Not only is there enormous personal and familial shame associated with rape, especially if the victim is a single woman, but the fact is that the taboo against it is so strong that even professionals who come in contact with the victim (like doctors) subscribe to the social norm which attaches greater value to secrecy than to psychological support and social reform.

In fact, a sympathetic physician, in conversation with a WAR member, reporting the case of a friend avoided using the word, rape, pointing instead to the word printed in the newsletter. In another case, a woman told us that while she was in great sympathy with our work, she expressed her concern at our open use of the word, rape, and suggested that we find a polite euphemism.

To assist victims, therefore, WAR has to actively investigate and aggressively seek out the victim in an environment of an enormous social conspiracy to conceal them. This takes up the bulk of time of WAR members. In many cases the effort proves fruitless as WAR members run into dead ends. The following cases provide a glimpse into the kind of problems that WAR has faced.

Case 1: A WAR sympathizer was informed that a young girl was raped in an armed robbery in a posh area, and that a gynaecologist who was a neighbour and a family friend had been called in to examine the girl. A WAR member contacted the gynaecologist, offering to provide confidential psychological help to the victim. The gynaecologist, while appreciative of the offer, said that she was under an oath of confidentiality, and since the family's main preoccupation at the time was to get the girl married, it was in the best interest of the girl that no one else know of the incident.

Case 2: In one of the Open Meetings of WAR, a female from the audience sought help for a young servant girl who had been raped by a family friend and was consequently pregnant. Her main concern was that WAR members provide her with a gynaecologist to perform an abortion. WAR was unable to provide this, but the woman was able on her own to get this done. In follow up, WAR members sought unsuccessfully to meet with the victim

and her mother, and even with the rapist (who was known to the victim's mother), but were told that neither the victim nor her employers wished the matter to be taken further. The mother, who alone in the victim's family knew of the incident, wished only to take her daughter back to the village and did not care to see the rapist punished.

Case 3: A WAR member came to know through a friend that a young girl, whose car had broken down, was given a ride by the Eagle Squad [a special police force formed to assist with the deteriorating law and order conditions] and was gang-raped by them. The victim had apparently wished to press charges but was dissuaded by her family for fear of reprisal. WAR members contacted the intermediary and asked her to offer their help to the victim, but were flatly refused.

It is important to understand the context in which this silence is maintained. Those who keep silent about rape believe they act in the best interest of the victim and the family. It is widely believed that a single woman who is raped stands no chance of getting married, while a married woman risks a strong possibility of divorce. In a culture where a woman's role and worth is defined in relation to a man, not being married means a bleak future, or no future at all. In these social and cultural conditions, the victim and the family have much to lose by speaking out. The tragic part, of course, is that in reality this silence protects the aggressor and further perpetuates the oppression of women.

Despite these difficulties, WAR has continued to make progress. To give a flavour of the kind of work WAR is currently engaged in, two cases may be worth mentioning.

Case 4: WAR learnt through a news story that a Portuguese woman, currently in jail, had been arrested on charges of drug smuggling and had been raped while in custody of Customs. She had not filed any complaint with the police. Since the laws against drug smuggling are quite harsh, it was difficult for WAR to get to the woman in jail. WAR members contacted her attorney, who managed to arrange a meeting with her. From the meeting, it became clear that she had been raped and was suffering from severe trauma. WAR members then had her write a letter which was conveyed by them to the police, and the police were persuaded (with assistance from the citizens-police liaison committee) to investigate the matter and file a First Information Report [FIR]. The case is now under investigation.

Case 5: National newspapers reported about the murder of a young female physician, who had apparently been sexually assaulted. Many women's organization expressed their outrage at the incident, especially as the police had not made any effort to apprehend the alleged murderer, who was a prominent citizen. Although the man was later apprehended, it was widely

believed that the public prosecutor would be unable to obtain a conviction. In this instance, WAR members, with the consent of the victim's family, approached a prominent lawyer, and had the Home Ministry appoint him as the special prosecutor. WAR members have been present at the trial and have ensured that the issue is kept alive through adequate press coverage. The case is under trial.

As illustrated by the second case, while WAR was created specifically to deal with rape, we have become deeply involved in a case which is primarily one of murder. This points to a general problem. WAR is often asked to assist in cases where rape is not explicitly the issue, but where women are being harassed and persecuted in equally outrageous ways. For example, WAR was approached by a young man whose friend was demanding that unless the young man had his fourteen year old sister marry the friend, he would file charges of abduction against the brother on the basis of a false marriage certificate that he had somehow obtained.

Reflecting upon our brief experience, it is all too obvious that rape is but one, albeit extreme, manifestation of the exploitation and oppression which pervades society at large. In this, women are especially oppressed, not only as a result of the unequal division of power between the sexes, but also as objects of oppression in the playing out of power struggles between families, clans and classes.

Over the centuries, the oppressed have learnt to cope with injustice, and have developed the ability not to complain, resorting instead to fortitude, and silent suffering. This has been accompanied by a strongly-held conviction that the existing order cannot be changed, that struggling against injustice is both futile and self-destructive, and hence the best way of coping is to conceal and carry on as best as one can. With this state of affairs, we are all very conscious that what WAR has accomplished so far is but a drop in the ocean.

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